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### Deposited in DRO:

15 May 2019

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Anderson, B. (2020) 'Cultural geography III : the concept of culture.', Progress in human geography., 44 (3). pp. 608-617.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519856264>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

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### **Cultural Geography 3: The Concept of Culture**

In my third report I argue that three versions of the concept of culture coexist in cultural geography in the wake of an interest in life and living: culture as *assembled effect*, culture as *mediated experience*, and culture as *forms-of-life*. All three break with one of the versions of culture in the 'new' cultural geography – culture as 'signifying system' – whilst retaining its focus on mediation. By expanding what counts as 'life' and the forms relations take, each version reworks a second concept of culture present in the 'new cultural geography' – culture as 'whole way of life'.

**Keywords:** Culture, Life, Living, Assemblage, Experience, Form-of-Life

### Cultural Geography 3: The Concept of Culture

“A concept exists only as long as it maintains an element that has *not* been conceived yet, which is still unattained and is perhaps unattainable, which is summoned by a question and which itself summons new questions”.

(Adi Ophir, 2005, np, emphasis in original)

Culture *as a concept* is absent from contemporary human geography. In the wake of the cultural turn and the associated ‘culturalisation’ of multiple fields of inquiry, an interest in culture and its geographies has, for a long while now, been everywhere in human geography. And in the midst of the emergence of the geohumanities, non-representational theories, and continued concern with the politics of difference, cultural geography has recently been animated by an enlivening proliferation of new problematics, concepts, methods, and modes of inquiry (as summarised in my previous reports Anderson 2017; 2018). Despite or perhaps because of this, and as has been noted in passing elsewhere (Bartolini, Raghuram, Revill 2017; Wylie 2010), culture as a concept has been subject to little explicit reflection in geography over the past 20 years. The last sustained engagement concerned the ontological status of the term, in the midst of emerging criticisms of some trajectories within the ‘new’ cultural geography (see Mitchell 1995). Since then, mostly silence; apart from occasional hints that existing concepts of culture might be being unsettled and new ones emerging (e.g. Duncan and Duncan 2004; Domosh 2014; for an exception see Rose (2010; 2012)).

This situation is unsurprising. A series of partially connected trajectories have left cultural geography with an ambivalent, strained, relation to culture as a *concept*, even as culture continues to function as a placeholder term that enables the various tendencies within cultural geography to coexist more or less harmoniously, and despite Culture<sup>i</sup> in the sense of the values and beliefs of an identifiable group once again holding explanatory allure as a shorthand for making sense of a turbulent political present (see, for example, current reference to the re-emergence of ‘culture wars’ in the

context of populisms or groups who have been 'left behind')<sup>ii</sup>. Culture is now difficult to attach to as a concept in the wake of critiques of the division of life into separate domains (the economic, the political, and so on), and recognition that the euro-modern category of Culture that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was founded upon a distinction with 'nature' that occludes indigenous ontologies, as well as denying or reducing differences 'within' modernity (after Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017). Instead of culture other terms that have become central to cultural geography – affect, materiality, performance, embodiment, habit, mobility, and so on – have recently been subject to the work of conceptualisation, in Ophir's (2005, np) sense of acts of explication and clarification which "postpone" the flow of habitual communication around a term as "we take the time to disengage it from its daily uses in order to put it on display, wonder about its meaning, explicate it, and render public its discursive being."

In the midst of the ambivalence that surrounds culture as a concept, what implicit versions of culture organise and animate contemporary cultural geography? In this review I describe three partially connected orientations: culture as *assembled effect*, culture as *mediated experience*, and culture as *form-of-life*. In different ways, all three break with the version of culture as 'signifying-system' that was central to some trajectories within the 'new' cultural geography, and rests on the aforementioned modern, western distinction between human life and nature. The presumption at the heart of that version of culture is that human access to the world is mediated through representational-referential systems - discourses, ideologies, or narratives – that organise the formation and circulation of meaning. Critical inquiry focuses on how those systems form and endure, including the degree to which subjects reproduce, enact or resist the system that they (or at least their interpretations, values and beliefs) are an instantiation or expression of (after Grossberg 2010: 187; Massumi 2002: XIV; Seigworth 2006). Of course, culture as 'signifying-system' has resulted in many profound and necessary insights about the ways in which the workings of signification links up to other forces. It is also this version of culture that has been repeated (with differences) in the 'cultural turn' that various sub-disciplines moved through from the late 1990s.

Nevertheless, all three current versions rework its starting proposition that access to the world is primarily mediated by the linguistic-discursive as they supplement a second version of the concept of culture that was also at play in the 'new' cultural geography: culture as the 'description of a particular whole way of life', as articulated by Williams (1961: 57)<sup>iii</sup>. In this report I show how each contemporary version of culture - *as assembled effect, mediated experience, and form-of-life* - pose new questions and respond to different problems as they rework what is understood as 'life'. In doing so, each version can be understood as a response to the problem and puzzle at the heart of cultural geography: how to disclose and respond to a heterogeneous world of differences.

### **Section One: Culture as 'Assembled Effect'**

The first version of culture present in contemporary cultural geography develops from critiques of how the 'new' cultural geography reified culture and granted it an ontological and explanatory status (see Mitchell 1995; for responses see Duncan & Duncan 1996; Jackson 1996; Cosgrove 1996; and Mitchell (1996) for his response). Research traces the material and affective work that different invocations of 'culture' do to enact and reproduce particular forms of power. Culture - or rather enactments of the always-already material-affective idea of 'culture' - is an assembled effect to be traced. The aim of analysis is to show how particular ideas of 'culture' (and other linked spheres such as 'economy') are formed, circulate, and change in ways that enact and reproduce power relations and formations. Typically, this work responds to a particular diagnosis of the present: that 'culture' is being put to work as a source of value through the 'cultural industries', the 'creative economy', 'place branding' and other processes in the midst of transformations in capitalism. Through work on consultants and drawing on assemblage theory, Prince (2015), for example, has shown how an idea of 'culture' has been assembled that shifts 'culture' from a resource to be protected from the market to a contributor to social and economic development.

Recent work has developed this now widespread emphasis on the mundane assembly of ideas of 'culture' by tracing people's affective attachment to and investment in those different ideas of 'culture'. Cockayne (2018) focuses on the gendering of the idea of 'workplace culture' in San Francisco's digital media sector. The idea of 'workplace culture', he argues "functions to describe certain individuals and behaviors as in or out of alignment with the firm's established and gendered norms" (ibid. 768). Ideas of 'workplace culture' gain power through an 'underperformed confidence' which was only occasionally interrupted by outright rejection of ideas or enthusiastic endorsement of them (see also Sweeney et al (2018) on 'placemaking'). This version of 'culture' as assembled effect is present in other partially connected subdisciplines. One trajectory within cultural economy, for example, focuses on various processes – valuation, commodification, marketisation, and so on - through which particular articulations of culture-economy relations are assembled (see Cooper and McFall 2017).

## **Section Two: Culture as 'Mediated Experience'**

Starting from 'culture' as *assembled effect* orientates a type of descriptive and critical inquiry to specific processes of (dis/re)assembly. The cultural politics that results starts by following the uses to which the material-affective idea of 'culture' is put by specific actors, and tracks the political and ethical effects of those ideas. The conceptual vocabulary in the background to this approach – broadly within the ambient of relational geographies - is shared with a second version of the concept of culture: culture as *mediated experience*. Recent work has described how a range of contemporary geo-historical processes and transformations are lived and felt. Beginning from how worlds are composed through a wide array of embodied, often habitual practices, this work breaks with culture as signifying-system by starting from the proposition that we are involved with the world through all manner of practical (dis)connections before we represent the world to ourselves or others (i.e. before some act of cognitive representationalism). Whilst it has been developed in quite different ways, all of which

refuse a simple division between the sensing or perceiving subject and sensed or perceived object, this starting proposition opens up interest in and orientation to the dynamics and qualities of living 'as it happens'. Uses of the term experience vary (on which see Jay 2005), but what work shares is a concern for how and with what consequences relations and events become palpable and are felt. Accompanying this orientation to experience as it happens has, therefore, been a (re)conceptualisation of a cluster of terms that were at the heart of humanist and humanistic approaches to cultural geography, including sensation, perception and bodily life (Colls 2012; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010; Straughan 2018), affect, feeling and emotion (Davidson 2016; Anderson 2014), subjectivity (Dawney 2013; Simpson 2017) and consciousness (Rose 2018). As one example of how this version of culture has become hegemonic in Anglophone cultural geography, consider how an important recent special issue of *Cultural Geographies* on 'cultural geographies of precarity' articulates what today constitutes a 'cultural geographies approach'. For Harris and Nowicki (2018: 388) this involves an orientation to how "constructions and experiences of the everyday" are mediated through a series of "collective affects and imaginaries". As with much cultural geography today, their starting point is the composition and mediation of felt experience (see, for other examples, recent social and cultural geography work on the geographies of religion and belief (Pile, Bartolini & MacKian 2017), mobilities (Bissell 2018; Gorman-Murray 2009), death and dying (Maddrell 2016), austerity (Raynor 2016; Hitchen 2018), and colonialism (Domínguez-Mujica, Andreu-Mediero and Kroudo 2018)).

This version of culture has a series of continuities with the emphasis on culture as 'whole way of life' in some parts of the 'new' cultural geography (e.g. Jackson 1989). Note the resonances between the orientation to relations and living as it happens that most recent work shares and Williams' (1961: 63) description of cultural analysis as "... the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life". What distinguishes recent work is that it expands what counts as experience to the (non)relations which happen before, after and around the subject, as well as the non or not yet conscious

practices and habits that provide the 'background' to thought and sense. In the context of work on culture as signifying-system and associated practices of critique, experience has, though, long been greeted with suspicion for its connotations of spontaneous immediacy (see, for example, the debates in Williams (1981)). This suspicion periodically reoccurs in current debates. Witness, for example, debates around the analytical and political promise of the term 'encounter' in the context of debates about ways of living in/with difference (Wilson 2018; Valentine, 2008; Hoekstra & Pinkster 2019). The discussion turns on whether and how encounters are spatially and temporally mediated by discursive-linguistic processes, with the charge being that some adherents of the term mistake encounters with punctual moments and ignore or downplay the politically charged geo-histories that shape, condition or determine relations across difference. A similar charge of forgetting the work of discursive-linguistic mediation in favor of an emphasis on immediate subject-object relations and events has been at the heart of critiques of (post)phenomenological accounts of landscape (see the exchange between Wylie (2005) and Blacksell (2005)) Leaving to one side the detail of these arguments, we can read these debates as exemplifying a tension between the two versions of culture – as signifying-system and as experience. Terms and assumptions of the former are used to offer a critique of the latter, often in ways that do not acknowledge the modern, Eurocentric inheritances of the assumption that access to the world is discursively mediated (on which see Blaser 2009).

Partly in response to these discussions and disagreements, recent work on culture as *mediated experience* expands what Grossberg (2010) calls the channels and forms of mediation beyond the linguistic-discursive, without ignoring the force and feel of representations as they become with lived experience (witness, for example, Harris & Nowicki (2018) on 'imaginaries', Daya (2019) on how 'words make worlds', and Mendas & Lau (2019) on the affectivity of 'narrations'). First, a series of affective conditions – structures of feeling or moods or atmospheres – are taken to mediate lived experience (Bille & Simonsen 2019; Raynor 2016). Second, a host of proximate and distant objects mediate how experience is composed and happens, including but not



limited to technical presences and processes (Ash 2015; Kinsley 2014; Leszczynski 2015; Pink & Sumartojo 2018). Here we can understand a cluster of partially connected terms – including ecology (Simpson 2013), infrastructure (Berlant 2016), network (Rose 2016), extra-sectional (Kraftl & Horton 2018), circumstance (McCormack 2017), assemblage (Dewsbury 2011), milieu (Bissell and Dewsbury 2015) – as ways of trying to understand how mediation happens without presuming what mediates or the form that mediation takes (that is, without assuming the ‘whole’ in Williams’ ‘whole way of life’). Consider, as one example of these various attempts to think around the problems of how heterogeneous things and forces hold together without repeating a structure-agency distinction, Berlant’s (2016) experimentation with ‘infrastructure’ as a “concept of structure in transitional times” (393). Defined by the “movement or patterning of social form”, for Berlant an infrastructure is the “living mediation of what happens” (ibid). The problem the concept responds to is how to understand how people’s proximity to being in a “world sustaining relation” is organised. As such, an infrastructure can be anything: families, prisons, norms, roads, and so on. Whilst it is offered and developed in relation to specific empirical scenes of living with/in ‘crisis ordinariness’, the concept is symptomatic of attempts to find a vocabulary and ethos sensitive to the heterogeneous forces, things and events that (de)compose experience.

### **Section Three: Forms-of-Life**

If the first version of culture orientates inquiry around how the material-affective idea of ‘culture’ is assembled, the second, culture as mediated experience, shifts attention to how forms of power are entangled with the (de)composition of experience. There remain a series of unresolved questions for an approach that in the wake of the emergence of the geohumanities and proliferation of non-representational theories is becoming hegemonic, particularly in Anglophone cultural geography. How to research the ongoing work and force of multiple forms of mediation, if experience is mediated by more than signifying systems and processes of mediation extend temporally and

spatially? Following on, how to research and present the relations between the dynamics and qualities of experience - the fleeting, the multiple, the in or non-coherent, the partial - and the social differences that pattern and condition experience? And finally how to sense and present difficult experiences of harm, damage and loss?

A cultural geography orientated to 'mediated experience' remains within the orbit of the 'whole way of life' version of culture and, in the main, focuses on the heterogeneity of *human* lives. A third trajectory within cultural geography pushes the expansion of what counts as 'life' in the 'way of life' tradition by asking difficult questions about what kinds of 'life' (and 'non-life') cultural geography should and can focus on. Work has begun to be orientated to 'more than human', 'inhuman', 'non-human', or 'other-than human' forces and entities; the non-organic life of data (Thornton 2018), bioinformation (Parry & Greenhough 2018), earth processes (Clark & Gunaratnam 2017), microbes (Lorimer 2017), street dogs (Srinivasan 2019), genetically modified animals (Davies 2014), various technoentities (Johnson 2015), events/conditions such as the Anthropocene (Matless 2017), and so on. This proliferation of the 'life' of cultural geography is, in part, a political and ethical response to a world in which, as Thacker (2011) puts it, life is 'everywhere at stake' in new configurations of capitalism, through forms of settler colonialism, and in the midst of climate change. Consider, for example, work that stays with the problem of how to understand the relation between the unequal distribution of harms and damages and the forces of an "eventful earth and cosmos" (Clark & Yusoff 2017: 4; Last 2017). Doing so disrupts and expands the 'life' (and non-life) cultural geography attends to by asking "how planetary dynamics, geological disjunctures and earth-historical trajectories may themselves have left their mark on the social beings we have variously become".

The challenge work on 'more than human' life poses to cultural geography is how to attend to the heterogeneity of forces and entities at a time in which lines between life and non-life are being reworked (Povinelli 2016). Instead of 'whole ways of life', such a cultural geography is (re)orientated to the (de)composition of plural, specific 'forms-of-life': with the hyphen indicating the inseparability of life from its

forms. Whilst the term ‘forms-of-life’ (or form of life or form-of-life) cuts across different traditions (e.g. Agamben 2013), I use it here to name the (dis)assembly of heterogeneous forces and entities that cross divisions of animate and inanimate, material and immaterial, life and non-life, and, most noticeably, human and non/more-than/other-than human. Consider how Yusoff’s (2018) “material geophysics of race”, for example, challenges the racial blindness of the Anthropocene by writing a ‘pre-history’ that shows how in the wake of and in the midst of extractive logics geologic forces are intertwined with the eradication and displacement of indigenous people, and forms of ongoing anti-black violence (see, for a different example, work on the forms-of-life associated with recent changes to the human microbiome as affected by modern hygiene and healthcare practices (Lorimer 2017; Hinchliffe 2015)).

As with words such as ‘ways’ or ‘modes’, there are questions beyond the scope of this report about the boundaries and interrelations between different forms-of-life, how they coexist, and how forms-of-life are entangled with different types of power. For now, we can say that the term orientates inquiry to the plurality of ways earthly and cosmic forces are (de/re)composed in relation to other material and immaterial forces. Whilst work on forms-of-life in a “dynamic planet” (Clark & Yusoff 2017: 11) respond, in part, to the problem and proposition of the Anthropocene, research with indigenous peoples reminds us that there is nothing new per se about the claim that the earth is lively or animated or that non-humans should be granted agency. Sundberg (2014) makes clear that the nature/culture split frequently invoked by posthumanist thinkers is not universal (a point Clark & Yusoff are also at pains to stress). As Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017: 69) make clear, for indigenous peoples who have already faced and are still facing the end of their worlds the modern Culture/Nature distinction never existed: “it is not simply a matter of differing cultural visions of the same natural world (the world described more or less exhaustively by modern sciences); nor of different cultural worlds imagined by a same humankind considered as a natural species”. Consequently, and as Blaser (2014) argues, work in indigenous geographies challenges what kinds of non/more-than or other-than human existents have and might

become matters of concern. In dialogue with recent anthropological work on the pluriverse and multiple worlds (see Viveiros de Castro 2014), Blaser asks how to learn to relate and be affected by 'multiple ontologies' without fetishizing otherness or reducing otherness to the same. For, as Cameron, Leeuw & Desbians (2014) and Hunt (2014) warn, the risk is that 'Indigeneity' is mobilized as a homogenised, depoliticised category in a way that further entrenches (neo)colonial forms of knowledge production. In trying to navigate this risk, as well as the risk of non-engagement, Blaser is clear that 'multiple ontologies' are not simply different cultures. The concept of *forms-of-life* is one response to the ethical and political problem that follows: how to relate to and recognise heterogeneous worldings in ways that don't distribute realities into oppositional categories of a single 'nature-real' and multiple 'cultural-reals' (see de la Cadena & Blaser 2018)). Other proposals are emerging. For example, Blaser's solution to this problem is to treat ontologies as *ways of worlding* (on worlds and worlding see Cheah 2016; Mohanty 2003). He advocates attuning to how "realities are made" as part of what he terms "the partially connected unfolding of worlds" (Blaser 2004: 55). Another response is provided by Povinelli (2016) who offers *modes of existence* as a way of understanding the combinations of life and non-life that her indigenous friends and colleagues desire to continue in the midst of forms of geopower.

### **Concluding Comments: *Cultural Geography*?**

At the end of the report I'm unsure whether the concept of culture should be jettisoned, rejected as an inheritance of the modern divide between Nature and Culture. Perhaps, the three orientations are what happens in the wake of Culture, at a time in which lines between subdisciplines are harder than ever to draw or attach to. In concluding, though, let's stay with my opening proposition that new versions of the concept of culture are emerging. In the quote that began this review, Adi Ophir (2005) stresses how the 'unattained' element of a concept is central to its capacity to 'summon' new questions. All three contemporary versions of the concept of culture pose new

questions and enable new orientations to and relations with worlds by breaking with one of the versions of culture in the 'new' cultural geography - culture as 'signifying system' - whilst retaining its focus on processes of mediation. By expanding what counts as 'life' and the forms relations take, each version reworks a second concept of culture present in the 'new cultural geography' - culture as 'whole way of life'.

What crosses the orientations to *assembled effect*, *mediated experience* and *forms-of-life* are questions of how to attend to differences as cultural geography responds to and intervenes in problems and provocations that differ markedly from those that animated past cultural geographies. Each version of culture centers slightly different problems of difference, supplementing the continued and necessary concern with how peoples are distributed into racialised, gendered and other hierarchies of worth through the operation of linguistic-discursive forms of mediation. How to attend to different invocations of 'culture' at a time in which 'culture' is mobilized as source of value, and Culture has retained a wider pull and allure as a category of explanation in a turbulent present? How to sense, disclose, and describe the diversity of experiences, and the ways in which the dynamics and qualities of experience are mediated by geo-historical events and processes? How to relate to inhuman, non-human or other-than-human forces, events and processes as the lines between life and non-life are blurred and reworked? The 'unattained' problem all three contemporary versions of culture circle around is one that remains at the heart of cultural geography - with or without culture: how to relate to and intervene in a heterogeneous world of differences.

## **Acknowledgments**

My thanks to Vickie Zhang and Nina Laurie for challenging, engaged comments on a previous version of this review, to Paul Harrison, Esther Hitchen, Noam Leshem, Ruth Raynor and Helen Wilson for discussions around cultural geography over the last few years, and to Nina and Chris Philo for their editorial generosity and care throughout the writing of these reports.

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<sup>i</sup> In this review, I capitalise Culture to refer to the euro-modern descriptor that identifies distinct patterns of human beliefs and values and emerged in distinction from Nature, 'culture' to refer to the different material-affective ideas of culture that are assembled and put to use, and culture or cultures for conceptual uses of the term.

<sup>ii</sup> Versions of culture are also unsettled and proliferating in other disciplines, where culture as concept appears to be subject to more explicit reconceptualization than in contemporary cultural geography (see, for example, Alexander (2011) in sociology, Grossberg (2010) in cultural studies, or Stewart (2007) in anthropology, although in each case their work exceeds disciplinary boundaries) .

<sup>iii</sup> It's worth recalling the complicated emergence of the concept of culture as a 'whole way of life' at the intersection of the British culturalist tradition and anthropology (particularly Ruth Benedict's 'patterns of culture'). This version played an important role in the 'new cultural geography', especially the emphasis, after Williams, on culture as 'ordinary' and the orientation to the relation between everyday life and novels, advertising, and other forms of signification (e.g. Jackson 1989; 1996).

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